

# Lifelong love shapes playwright's take on the Bard



FRANCISCO KJOLSETH | *The Salt Lake Tribune*

Utah playwright Tim Slover is shown at the Babcock Theater on the University of Utah campus, where "March Tale," his play about Shakespeare, will be read as part of Pioneer Theatre Company's Play-by-Play development series.

**Stage »** Another round of workshops, readings for "March Tale" helps Tim Slover bring Shakespeare's story to life.

**By ELLEN FAGG WEIST**

*The Salt Lake Tribune*

As a Provo high school student, playwright Tim Slover recalls watching lavish costume parades to promote shows at the Utah Shakespeare Festival.

Later, Slover went on to act at the festival for one season, then plunged into an academic career. He writes historical plays and screenplays while teaching playwriting at Brigham Young University and the University of Utah. For 23 years, he's made annual pilgrimages to London and Shakespeare's hometown of

Stratford-on-Avon, leading Utah students and adults on theater study abroad trips.

Over his years of studying Shakespeare's plays, Slover says he has become more and more enamored of The Bard's triple plotting, the intricate weave of a high plot with a romance plot and low comedy. "I owe a great debt, a little bit in my writing, and more in my living, to the ideas and emotional heft of that playwright," Slover says.

In writing and rewriting "March Tale," a play about the personal life of William

*Please see STAGE, D7*

## Stage

» Continued from D1

Shakespeare, Slover gave himself the challenge of that structure, drawing upon three likely plots unfolding in 1603, a significant year in Shakespeare's career that the playwright first remembered hearing from USF founder Fred Adams.

Slover's newest reworking of his play will receive a staged reading Jan. 22-23. He's the first Utah-based playwright whose work has been featured as part of Pioneer Theatre Company's 3-year-old Play-by-Play development series.

Other plays in this year's series are Kenneth Jones' fascinating reconsideration of a man's relationship with his dead lover's mother, and Sarah Bierstock's newsy debut about a young female journalist who trips across her own past when she becomes obsessed with reporting a story about a Pakistani woman who was killed by her family after eloping with the man she loved.

The success of Jones' "Alabama Story," the first of the company's readings to receive a full production in 2014, gave a boost to PTC's new-play development series. Local audiences embraced the historical drama about the censorship of a children's book, earning it the highest single-ticket revenue for a new play in PTC's history. Now a handful of other productions of "Alabama Story" are planned this season at regional theaters across the country.

■ ■ ■

**Overcoming a 'blandly happy' childhood** » Slover, 59, might be best-known to Utah theatergoers for "Joyful Noise," his play about the backstory of Handel's writing of "Messiah." "Noise" premiered at Pioneer Theatre Company in 2000 and has been produced in the holiday slot for seven years at Provo's Covey Center for the Arts.

He's also written historical plays about Benjamin Franklin ("Lightning Rod"), Alexander Hamilton ("Treasure") and Hildegard von Bingen, a

12th-century mystic credited with writing the world's first opera ("Virtue").

He writes historical plays, Slover jokes with the quick and self-deprecating wit he's known for, because he had such a mundane and "blandly happy" childhood. "I have no family stories that are worth telling," he says, explaining how he seeks historical moments that resonate with the present. "I really do have to go to other places to find stories."

Most recently, Slover felt the heat of the national spotlight as one of three Utah theater artists selected as part of Oregon Shakespeare Festival's "Play on!," a provocative three-year project to "translate" the Shakespeare canon into contemporary language.

That prominent commission underscores Slover's intimate Shakespeare-influenced storytelling in "March Tale," which David Ivers says manages to feel both classical and contemporary.

"It's a very difficult thing to write a period play, and Tim's natural dexterity with language and understanding of structure make 'March Tale' a must-see," says Ivers, co-artistic director of USF, who will direct the PTC workshop and reading. "And it's quite funny."

"Tim is just lovely with language," says his faculty colleague Martine Kei Green-Rogers, who recommended him for the playwrighting assignment and will work as a dramaturg on "The Two Noble Kinsmen."

Green-Rogers says she and Slover often "geek out" over their shared love of Shakespeare trivia in faculty meetings. And in a nice Small Lake City coincidence, Green-Rogers' husband, actor S.A. Rogers, is cast in PTC's "March Tale" reading.

In his teaching, his tours or his writing, Slover makes Shakespeare come alive, says Jane England, a U. adjunct theater instructor who works with him to plan the student London Study Abroad and continuing-education adult tours.

The backstory of Slover's "March Tale" carries its own

### Play-by-Play series

Pioneer Theatre workshops and then presents readings of three new plays in its annual play development series, billed as: "No sets, no costumes, scripts in hand — this is play development happening, right in front of you."

This year's plays:

**"March Tale"** » By Utah playwright Tim Slover

**When** » Friday, Jan. 22, 8 p.m., and Saturday, Jan. 23, 2 and 8 p.m.

**"Two Henrys"** » By Kenneth Jones, whose "Alabama Story" was read as part of the 2014 Play-by-Play series, which led to PTC's premiere production last year.

**When** » Friday, Feb. 5, 8 p.m., and Saturday, Feb. 6, 2 and 8 p.m.

**"Honor Killing"** » A debut play by Sarah Bierstock

**When** » Friday, March 11, 8 p.m., and Saturday, March 12, 2 and 8 p.m.

**Tickets** » \$10 per reading; \$5 for PTC subscribers; 801-581-6961 or pioneertheatre.org

**Where** » Readings at Babcock Theatre, downstairs at the Simmons Pioneer Memorial Theatre, 300 S. 1400 East, University of Utah campus, Salt Lake City

drama. He originally wrote the script about Shakespeare's personal life in the late 1990s, winning the Association of Mormon Letters theater prize and a national Writer's Digest prize. A version of "March Tale" received a reading at the Utah Shakespeare Festival and went on to be produced at several regional theaters and off-Broadway.

On a friend's suggestion, Slover sent the script to a Hollywood producer. Several years later, that producer was credited for working on 1998's "Shakespeare in Love," which might be perceived to share some plot similarities.

He might have a case, an entertainment lawyer suggested, but it would be difficult for an unknown Utah playwright to win a lawsuit.

Instead, Slover set aside the story for a time. Over the years, as he regularly led theater trips to London and Stratford, he became less convinced by the popular perceptions of Shakespeare's marriage. "It might have been really difficult and fraught and argumentative and disappointing, but ultimately it was still a marriage, not a shotgun marriage or marriage for convenience," he came to believe.

When he went back to "March Tale," he recrafted the story to give more weight to its

female characters. "It helps to have been married for a number of years now and to have sons with very strong-minded girlfriends," he says.

■ ■ ■

**'Specify up'** » In addition to working together on the PTC workshop, Slover and Ivers are among 70 theater artists (including "Avenue Q's" Jeff Whitty) commissioned for "Play on!," the OSF project announced in September. Teams of playwrights and dramaturgs are assigned to create "companion translations" of the 39 plays in the Shakespeare canon.

Ivers is working with dramaturg Lezlie C. Cross, from the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, on "As You Like It," while Slover is working on Shakespeare's last play, "The Two Noble Kinsmen," with Green-Rogers. "Kinsmen" is slated for a future University of Utah production, one of only three of the "companion translations" currently scheduled to be produced.

It's a "what if?" project, says Lue Douthit, OSF director of literary management and dramaturgy, in the project's announcement. Playwrights and dramaturgs were asked to "first do no harm," and then to "put the same pressure and rigor of language as Shakespeare did on his, keeping in mind meter, rhythm, metaphor, image,

rhyme, rhetoric and emotional content."

"Play on!" isn't an effort to "dumb down" Shakespeare's language but rather "specify up," writes OSF's artistic director Bill Rauch in a recent edition of "American Theatre" magazine.

As theater lovers might imagine, the announcement sparked immediate controversy. "A waste of money and talent," Shakespeare scholar and Columbia English professor James Shapiro raged in The New York Times. "The problem is not the often knotty language; it's that even the best directors and actors — British as well as American — too frequently offer up Shakespeare's plays without themselves having a firm enough grasp of what his words mean."

As someone deeply invested in Shakespeare's work, Ivers says he was both dubious and fascinated by the idea of the translation project. "I accepted the offer, in part, because I wondered why it initially rubbed me the wrong way," he says.

It was also an opportunity to get paid for what he normally does as an actor, teacher or director while working on a play. Usually, he doesn't make that research public. "Now I must," Ivers says. "And I'm enjoying the challenge."

In contrast, Slover says he's attempting to avoid any talk about the controversy. "I function best as a writer, I always have, by not knowing things," he says.

He considers the commission, on the recommendation of Green-Rogers, an opportunity to focus on his playwrighting, beyond the time he invests in teaching. The chance to really dig into a play, to puzzle over every word, is a luxury few people beyond actors have. "It's a very positive boost to the way I teach and think about Shakespeare," he says. "And you get ideas for new plays when you do this kind of close work."

ellenf@sltrib.com  
facebook.com/ellen.weist